

NEW YORK TIMES
8 November 1985ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A1B

U.S. Aides Split on Yurchenko's Authenticity

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Nov. 7 — Reagan Administration officials said today that the Government was divided over whether Vitaly Yurchenko was a genuine defector or an agent planted as part of a Soviet ploy.

The officials said the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council staff were split not only over the intentions of Mr. Yurchenko, but also over the value of the information he provided in debriefings.

The prevailing view in the C.I.A. is that Mr. Yurchenko was a valuable catch, officials said. The agency told Congress that he provided significant information about Soviet intelligence practices before he decided to go home.

At the White House, staff members of the National Security Council are said to believe that his revelations have proved of minimal use. These officials see this as evidence that the man identified as a deputy director of the K.G.B.'s North American operations may well have been planted.

"This whole thing was very good theater," a White House official said. "And to me, theater is something that is staged."

Officials said the C.I.A. would now try to check whether Mr. Yurchenko's information could be verified. C.I.A. officials continue to insist that the information was valuable.

In an interview Wednesday, President Reagan appeared to share the views of members of his National Security Council staff. He said there was a "suspicion" that Moscow had staged the Yurchenko affair as well as two other incidents in which Soviet citizens seemed eager to defect and then changed their mind.

Mr. Reagan also said that Mr. Yurchenko had provided little of value, thus contradicting statements made by William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, to members of Congressional intelligence committees.

The question of the value of the information is central to the issue whether

Mr. Yurchenko was planted, officials said. If the C.I.A. eventually concludes that the K.G.B. man provided nothing new, this would undermine the theory that he was a genuine defector.

Senator William Cohen, Republican of Maine and a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, was one of several Senators who expressed doubts about Mr. Yurchenko's legitimacy.

"We were told it was very important information," the Senator said. "The agency believed he was valid and the information they were receiving was very important. We have said go back and re-examine it in retrospect and see whether it was really important."

Another committee member, Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, believes Mr. Yurchenko was planted. The committee chairman, Dave Durenberger, who is a Republican from Minnesota, acknowledged the possibility, but maintained that "there is more reason to believe this was a person with a problem."

Officials said that the C.I.A. planned to review all aspects of the case, including the circumstances of Mr. Yurchenko's purported defection in Rome and the debriefings.

"Our business is to be skeptical," an official said. "You cannot exclude any possibility on something like this. You have to use a devil's-advocate type of approach."

Those who doubt Mr. Yurchenko's bona fides have noted that he provided details about agents no longer of any use to the Soviet Union.

Other sources in the Administration and Congress said Mr. Yurchenko had provided leads that if, verified, were "more than historical."

"What you see in the public domain," an official said, "is nothing."

He said whether the leads could be verified would play a significant role in deciding whether Mr. Yurchenko was a genuine defector.